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# THE ETHNOPOLITICAL MOVEMENT AS A VEHICLE FOR NATIONALISM INSTITUTIONALISATION IN MODERN LATVIA

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*This article investigates the Popular Front of Latvia, a public ethnopollitical movement that substantially contributed to the independence of the modern Republic of Latvia. The study aims to identify how much the movement influenced the development of ethnic nationalism, which has become essential to statehood and the identification of politics. It continues to reinforce group inequality in this multiethnic country. The article describes the background and main landmarks of the movement. Content analysis of manifestos has been carried out to trace changes in the Popular Front's ideological vision. It is shown that the shift in priorities that took place during the 1988–1991 struggle for Latvia's political and economic independence led to a non-democratic political regime. Particular attention is paid to the movement's proposals concerning the principles of statehood restoration and citizenship acquisition as well as to approaches to solving ethnic problems. The focus is on why and under what circumstances the Popular Front dissolved itself and the supra-ethnic opposition, its main rivals, left the political scene. It is argued that the Popular Front of Latvia created conditions both for the titular nation taking precedence over other ethnic groups and for the exclusion of one-third of the country's resident population from political life. It is concluded that, as the movement transformed and gradually abandoned its democratic principles, it became the main vehicle for the institutionalisation of ethnic nationalism in Latvia.*

**Keywords:** Republic of Latvia, Popular Front of Latvia, nationalism, ethnopollitical movement

## Introduction

Studies of the modern Baltic States are of both theoretical and practical interest since the relationship with non-titular ethnic groups still works in these countries on the principles of political and social inequality, despite the officially declared commitment to the ideals of liberal democracy. The institutionalisation of nationalism in Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia merits special attention. The process was driven by popular ethnopollitical movements, which, once in power,

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both expedited Baltic independence and laid the foundations for a political regime defined by experts as ethnic democracy. According to Sammy Smooha, ethnic democracies shape the symbols, laws and policies of the state for the benefit of the ethnic nation that constitutes the majority whereas minorities might be perceived as a threat [1]. These regimes present ample opportunities for research, which may stimulate the development of national movement theories, methods for nationalism studies, as well as the research fields of ethnopolitical mobilisation and nationalism-based identity policies of states.

Ethnopolitical movements in the Soviet Baltic republics, particularly, the Latvian SSR, were a product of authorities-approved activities of the national intelligentsia. Later, the general public embraced their ideas. Having gained support amid liberalisation and glasnost, the organisations began to exert a strong influence on political processes. The consolidation of the movements was prompted by the crises of the Soviet system, the demands of republican authorities for greater powers, growing protest and separatist sentiment, the debate on the revision of the Baltics' history, and the emergence of independent grassroots associations. In all the three Baltic republics, an important impetus was the official Soviet policy of perestroika introduced in 1985 — a package of fundamental reforms aimed at improving the socio-political and economic situation.

The reforms were advocated by political fronts — popular civil associations that had their own coordinating bodies and whose aims and values enjoyed broad support. On the one hand, they represented opposition to 'old Communism' and struggle against the flaws and problems of the Soviet system. On the other, they were allies of the Union authorities headed by Secretary-general of the Central Committee (CC) of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) Mikhail Gorbachev and helped him to control both public sentiment and the activities of various groups and organisations. The popular fronts of the Baltics did manage to mobilise society. Their ultimate goal, however, was a far cry from reforms in the USSR.

Many studies have explored various aspects of the emergence of popular ethnopolitical movements in Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia as well as the formation of ethnocentric regimes in these countries. Publications that are most relevant to this study can be divided into two groups. The first one brings together works focusing on the emergence, development, and activities of ethnopolitical movements in the Baltics as well as on the circumstances of their secession from the USSR. These are publications by Viktor Gushchin [2], Rasma Karklins and Brigita Zepa [3], Stanislav Kinka [4], Mara Lazda [5], Aleksandr Potapov [6], Renald Simonyan [7], Yulia Ulyanova [8], Daina Eglitis [9], and others. The second group comprises studies of ethnonational politics and ethnic nationalism in the Baltics after the collapse of the USSR. These are books and contributions by Timofey Agarin [10], Vladislav Vorotnikov [11], Mary Dakin [12], Aleksandr Dyukov and Vladimir Simindey [13], Vadim Musaev [13], Vadim Smirnov [15],

Aleksandr Sytin [16], and Ammon Cheskin [17]. Another important exploration of the ethnopolitical problems of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia is the collection of papers *Ethnic Policy in the Baltic States* [18].

Analysis of the literature suggests that, despite the abundance of relevant studies, researchers often overlook how the transformation of the ethnopolitical movements, which propelled the Baltic towards independence, affected the political evolution of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia.

This article aims to find out how much the movement influenced the development of ethnic nationalism in modern Latvia. To this end, we consider the key development stages of Latvia's popular ethnopolitical movement after 1985, identified and compare its changing ideological positions, and describe the process of transformation as well as its role in the rise of an ethnocentric regime.

## **Methods**

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We assume that nationalism is a political ideology and practice that seeks to assert the priority of the nation as well as to develop an identity rooted in embracing by individuals their belonging to that nation. Ethnic nationalism is the dominance of one ethnic group, which is believed to have the primary right to the statehood and territory, over other groups in political and social life.

Research into the institutionalisation of nationalism carried out in this article draws on the theoretical principles of constructivism. This approach suggests that ethnicity built on the idea of, or belief in, a common culture and history is a form of the social construction of cultural differences and that it allows actors to influence both nation-building and the development of nationalism.

This study relies for analytics and data on relevant literature, programmes, and the media. The method of qualitative content analysis is employed to analyse the ideological positions of the Latvian ethnopolitical movement, whereas the historical method is used to explore the development and manifestations of Latvian nationalism.

## **The Popular Front of Latvia on its way to reforms**

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Although the popular fronts of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia were officially established in 1988, the creation of such associations had been discussed with the CPSU Central Committee among other bodies, for several years after the declaration of reforms by the Soviet Union authorities. The Latvian initiators of the popular movement raised their voices in June 1988 at an extended plenary meeting of artistic unions. The meeting was organised in Riga by the president of the Union of Soviet Authors of the Latvian SSR, a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Latvia (CPL), Jānis Peters. Most of the participants in the meeting were members of the CPL leadership and the intelligentsia. Encouraged

by anti-Soviet rallies, the latter would become the founding force behind the Popular Front of Latvia (PFL) [6, p. 38]. The artistic convention became a platform for political discussion on the status of the Latvian language, demography and migration, and the legitimacy of Latvia's accession to the USSR. The meeting stressed the need for popular involvement in grassroots perestroika to ensure the irreversibility of the reforms. After the convention, supporters of the PFL, which included very different groups, started to participate in public events organized by Latvian opposition. Gradually, independence appeared on the agenda. 'Symbolic reclamation of the nation was a centrepiece of collective action in the early opposition period. Although overt political demands were still risky, and few in the opposition were prepared to ask for full national independence, symbolic demands, like those related to environmental protection, or symbolic deeds, such as commemorating the Stalinist mass deportations of Balts, were important. It was because 'they laid bare problems widely believed to be symptomatic of a larger problem, the Soviet regime itself, Eglitis writes when describing public activity in Latvia from 1986 to the establishment of the Popular Front, which consolidated the opposition [9, p. 37].

The founding congress of the PFL, which took place on October 8–9, 1988, brought together 1,100 delegates who represented, according to estimates, up to 110,000 people. The first factor in the popularity of the fronts was growing oppositional sentiment and anti-communist solidarity [3, p. 335]. The second factor was firm support for popular movements, which were to become drivers of perestroika, from Gorbachev and his entourage. Opponents of the PFL noted that, from 1988, ideologists from the CPSU CC consulted the artistic intelligentsia and their allies about the founding of the organisation. The efforts of the initiators were supported by state security bodies: the activists had full access to the republican media, whereas workplace party organisations were required to form local PFL groups.<sup>1</sup> Probably, the Union leadership did count on the fronts to limit the influence of the conservative CPSU. Dmitry Lukashevich links the activity of the movements with the plans of Gorbachev and his supporters to introduce a multi-party system in the USSR. 'Gorbachev understood that the CPSU was ceasing to be a tool to expedite perestroika; the party was putting the brakes on perestroika and threatening the political integrity of the secretary-general. The party had to be subdued, and Gorbachev had to ensure the irreversibility of perestroika by assuming the office of President of the USSR' [19, p. 48].

The first congress elected the governing body of the Popular Front: the one hundred strong Duma was chaired by the journalist Dianis Ivans. The congress adopted a charter [20, l. 200–207] and a resolution and agreed on a manifesto

<sup>1</sup> 'Not a word about Russian occupants'. The deputy of the Supreme Soviet of Latvia, Viktor Alksnis on the disintegration of the USSR. Lenta.ru. URL: <https://lenta.ru/articles/2016/02/25/alksnis1> (accessed: 13.09.2019).

[20, l. 207—224].<sup>2</sup> The principal media outlet of the PFL was the *Atmoda* — a newspaper published in both Latvian and Russian. The name of the periodical, which means ‘awakening’, was an allusion to emerging national consciousness. The term was also applied to the Popular Front and the Latvian stage of the Baltic Singing Revolution.

The primary goal of the PFL was ‘to establish true popular rule and a democratic state, to ensure cultural and economic prosperity, and to solve national problems’ [20, l. 200]. The first edition of the PFL manifesto focused on the role and principles of a socio-political organisation, democratisation and true popular rule, human rights, national relations, culture, ethics, education and research, social justice and humanisation, the economy, the environment, healthcare, and sports. The most radical points in the document waged a campaign against Stalinism, the administrative-bureaucratic system of neo-Stalinism, and centralisation. It was proposed that the Latvian SSR be granted the right to veto any decision concerning the republic as well as the right to accede to international organisations. The need for sovereignty was voiced. The manifesto emphasised that citizens of Latvia had to be masters of their land and solve all possible problems independently [20, l. 209]. The document stressed the need for an independent constitutional court and constitutional control exercised by the republican prosecution service, for the division of powers in the republic, and for the separation of the party from the state. Although all the above questioned the leading role and political monopoly of the CPSU, the manifesto did not call for an open confrontation with the party, nor did it mention Latvia’s possible secession from the USSR. Moreover, all the ideas and plans of the PFL were presented as being in good agreement with the ideas of Leninism, Soviet perestroika, and the principles of socialism and humanism. The final resolution declared determined and unwavering support for the new party line.

In its manifesto, the Popular Front urged the reform of citizenship laws, an end to immigration, and a revision of the ethnonational policy. The PFL, which welcomed an objective interpretation of Latvian history, demanded in the same document that the incorporation of the republic in the USSR be recognised as forcible. The Soviet policy of national nihilism was viewed as the cause of the deformation and deterioration of national relations — the processes that, alongside immigration, had wronged the Latvians and other ethnic groups. The manifesto argued that uncontrolled migration had made the Latvian people, for the first time in its history, a minority in its own land and threatened its existence and statehood [20, l.??]. Although the PFL did not support the idea of expelling ‘non-natives’, it saw immigrants from other Soviet republics as victims of Stalin’s national policy. The Latvian authorities had to help those willing to return to their homelands. The PFL condemned the mechanical unification of nationalities, especially in schools and kindergartens.

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<sup>2</sup> *Latvijas Tautas frontes dibināšanas kongress*. 1988. g. 8., 9. oktobris. Rezolūcijas // Padomju Jaunatne. 1988. g. 19. oktobrī.

The PFL demanded that the Latvian language be recognised as the official language. The movement addressed the problem of representation of the titular nation in the Soviets of the republic and proposed that legislative and representative ethnic quotas should be introduced. The manifesto read that the Latvian people had the status of the indigenous nation since Latvia was the historical land of the Latvians, the only place in the world where the Latvian nation, the Latvian language, and Latvian culture could preserve themselves and develop [20, l. 213]. The PFL, however, advocated the rights of any national minority for educational and cultural autonomy. That way, the movement could ensure the loyalty of local Russian speakers and recruit new supporters. At the time, non-titular ethnic groups accounted for about half the population of the republic. The PFL was active in protecting the ethnic interests of all nationalities living in Latvia, their languages, cultures, education, and religious consciousness. The movement denounced any attempts to stir ethnic hostility or to destroy the dignity of any resident of the Latvian SSR. The manifesto emphasised that the protection of the native tongue and culture should be the responsibility of any citizen of the republic, regardless of his or her nationality [20, l. 213].

Thus, the central demands of those who supported the reform of the Soviet system were sovereignty and broad autonomy in a federative structure. From the perspective of national relations, the future of Latvia lay in building a single poly-ethnic state that guarded the interests of the majority. Right at the start, however, the foundation was laid for the ethnopolitical mobilisation of the Latvians through appeals to their indigenous origins and discriminated-against position in the Soviet Union.

### **The emergence of the ethnopolitical movement**

The PFL was immediately supported by the Republican leadership while the Union authorities were losing ideological and recruitment control over Latvia's elite. The ideas of the PFL were shared by part of the Communist nomenklatura, the so-called 'ethnic appointees'. As Sytin writes, members of the economic and party leadership of the Baltic republics mostly encouraged the popular fronts, trying to infiltrate them in an attempt to preserve their own high standing [16]. High-ranking opponents of the fronts were accused of provocations and benefiting from the stagnation.

One of the most influential advocates of the PFL was the secretary for ideology of the CPL CC, Anatoly Gorbunov, who was elected the chair of the Supreme Soviet of the Latvian SSR on October 6, 1988. On the same day, he signed the resolution of the Supreme Soviet 'On the status of the Latvian language',<sup>3</sup> which recognised Latvian as the official language of the republic and instructed the

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<sup>3</sup> *Latvijas PSR Augstākās padomes lēmums par latviešu valodas statusu*. URL: <http://www.vvk.lv/index.php?sadala=135&id=167> (accessed: 13.09.2019).



executive bodies to develop measures to enshrine the language in the Constitution, to promote its study and use in education and official communication. The resolution was declared to follow the principles of Lenin's national politics, resolutions of the 19<sup>th</sup> All-union Conference of the CPSU, and the postulate that national values and the Latvian language had not been neglected in the republic. According to the document, the Russian language retained its role of the language of federal relations; citizens had the right to use the language in communication with authorities. The very first initiative to assert the priority of the Latvian language was the first step towards the institutionalisation of ethnic nationalism in its practice aspect [21].

The PFL gained representation in republican authorities after its first electoral success of March–April 1989. The Popular Front of Latvia, which had established its commitment to the transformation of the state as well as the political and economic sovereignty of the republic, won 30 seats in the supreme Union authority. Latvian voters elected deputies across 40 national-territorial and territorial districts. Only five seats were secured by the CPL and the International Front of Workers (Interfront). The impressive results of the PFL were partly owed to the peculiar division into electoral districts, which translated into an uneven representation of urban and rural residents, the titular nation and minorities [12, pp. 17–18].

In spring–summer 1989, the PFL was preparing for the second congress. In the process, it radically revised its proposals on the socio-political future of Latvia. On May 31 the board of the Duma published an appeal to the members of the Popular Front. The document stressed the impossibility of securing sovereignty while being part of the USSR and justified parliamentary struggle for political and economic independence as well as for a transformation of the governance structure. The leadership of the PFL thought it necessary to amend the constitution to abolish the supremacy of Soviet laws in Latvia and, for the Supreme Soviet of the Latvian USSR, to adopt a declaration of sovereignty and laws on economic independence. This appeal of the Popular Front could be explained by final disillusionment with perestroika [22, l. 5]. Further decisions taken by the PFL suggests that it was considering a plan for Front-led secession from the USSR.

On July 16, 1989, the Ideological Platform of the PFL was adopted to consolidate the Latvian population of different nationalities [20, l. 261–262]. The declaration of independence by democratic Latvia was announced the primary goal of the organisation. The Latvian nation was named the foundation of sovereignty. Remarkably, alongside acknowledging all rights and freedoms of the residents of the republic regardless of their social status, nationality, and religious beliefs, the document proposed to grant citizenship only to those who supported the idea of independence and had lived in Latvia for at least ten years before the registration. On the one hand, this measure had to stop immigration. On the other, its main consequence would have been discrimination against a significant part of Latvian



Russian speakers who did not want to leave the republic. The idea of residential qualification was so controversial that, by autumn 1989, the Popular Front did not insist on the immediate adoption of new citizenship laws any more [2, p. 19].

In response to the appeals of the PFL, the secession of the republic from the USSR was expedited by regulations adopted by the Latvian Supreme Soviet in 1989, including the declaration 'On the state sovereignty of Latvia'.<sup>4</sup> The document declared that Latvia had to become the successor of the independent democratic republic of 1917–1920, which was stripped of its sovereignty by 'Stalin's unlawful foreign policy'. Therefore, the ultimate goal was to restore the statehood established for the Latvian people, which had preserved its unique language and culture, to exercise its right to independent development and national self-determination. This approach provided an ideological framework for the new line of policy [23]. Although the declaration said that the independence of the people of Latvia was a formal guarantee of the prosperity of the Latvian nation and all the other ethnic groups living in the republic, it gave an impetus to official struggle against the Soviet legacy, particularly, changes to the interpretation of the historical past. Later it had an immediate effect on the ethnonational policy since the doctrine of occupation both led to discord and gave grounds for a discriminatory policy against national minorities. Vorotnikov writes that the myth of occupation contributed to the image of Russia as the *primaeval* enemy that pursues an imperial and aggressive policy towards smaller nations, on the one hand, and justified the 'return to Europe', on the other [11].

In October 1989, the second PFL congress took place. The movement finally rejected perestroika in favour of a 'national-democratic revolution' [8, p. 141]. At the time, the Popular Front had over 210,000 members who were represented at the congress by 1,061 delegates, mostly ethnic Latvians. Ivans retained his position of the chair, and the *duma* was re-elected at the convention. Orientation towards independence and a democratic parliamentary republic with a market economy required changes to the basic documents of the organisation.

The second edition of the PFL manifesto contained sections dedicated to the political system and independence of Latvia, as well as to the freedom of consciousness and religion, ecology, and demilitarisation.<sup>5</sup> Another significant part of the document openly denied the monopoly of the CPSU to power and its ideological control over social life. The manifesto also declared the intention of the Popular Front as an independent political force to take part in the upcoming election to the Supreme Soviet of the Latvian SSR.

<sup>4</sup> *Latvijas PSR Augstākās padomes deklarācija par Latvijas valsts suverenitāti*. URL: [http://www.saeima.lv/4maijs/docs/d\\_28julijs.htm](http://www.saeima.lv/4maijs/docs/d_28julijs.htm) (accessed: 15.09.2019).

<sup>5</sup> The manifesto of the Popular Front of Latvia. *New sociopolitical movements and organisations in the USSR. Documents and materials*. Moscow, 1990. Part 2. Pp. 155–187.

As to the national question, the second edition of the manifesto advocated the rights and freedoms of all people regardless of their origin, social standing, beliefs, and occupation. The Popular Front supported the idea of integration within the current multi-national structure of society and stressed the importance of meeting the cultural needs of all ethnic groups. It denounced the image of the enemy, national arrogance, chauvinism, anti-Semitism, Russophobia, national protectionism, nihilism, and imperial attitudes. It was articulated at the congress that the way to independence lay through democratisation [24, l. 116].

Of equal significance were the resolutions that the PFL adopted at the second congress. In relation to state-building, the documents called for the republican authorities to proclaim the declaration of Latvia's accession to the USSR illegal. It was also proposed to grant citizenship only to those who had lived in the republic before 1940. The position of the Popular Front on citizenship was not entirely consistent: the manifesto did not mention residential qualification or any other naturalisation condition for permanent residents. Citizenship was promised to anyone who voiced his or her intention to acquire Latvian citizenship and pursue a future in the republic. That way, the Popular Front of Latvia was leading Russian speakers to expect democratic inclusion and Latvians, ethnic democracy [25, p. 18].

The inclusive attitudes of the manifesto and the political appeals made by members of the movement in 1988–1989 encourage some Western researchers to classify the PFL as a trans-ethnic or transnational civil association. This point of view is made explicit by the historian Mara Lazda, who attempts at a revision of the ethnonational interpretation of the PFL's activities [5]. Having analysed publications in the *Atmoda*, the membership of the Popular Front, and its international contacts, she concludes that the movement was open to all ethnic groups and it envisaged an association of national and cultural autonomies. Lazda believes that the Popular Front married the nationalism of the titular nation with the ideas of integration and kept itself at a distance from the Soviet policy of internationalism. She admits, however, that civil and language laws adopted later on the initiative of the Popular Front turned into an ideational framework to strengthen Latvia's independence were a deviation from democratic ideals. Moreover, as other international experts emphasise, those measures were overt attempts to prompt the emigration of non-Latvian residents [12, p. 34]. We believe that it is important to discuss the transformation of the PFL when exploring these issues. Already during the preparation for the election to the Supreme Soviet of the Latvian SSR<sup>6</sup> in March — April 1990, the PFL, once a civil society institution [26, pp. 113–114], turned into a separatist ethnopolitical movement

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<sup>6</sup> Amendments to the Constitution of the Latvian SSR of January 1990 stripped the Communist Party of its special status. The citizens were granted the right to create independent political parties.

that was supported by most of the population and had enormous influence on political processes in the republic. Although the democratic values expressed in the manifesto and publications of the PFL remained a priority, the plan to establish them lost its urgency.

### **The turn to ethnocracy**

In the parliamentary election, the PFL-led coalition won 131 out of 201 seats: the anti-system opposition became the ruling force. The supporter of the movement, Gorbunov, kept his position of the chair of the Supreme Council. Ivans became the vice-speaker of the parliament; the deputy chair of the Popular Front, Ivars Godmanis, headed the cabinet of the republic. Some key positions in the government were also taken by PFL members.

On May 4, 1990, the Supreme Council of the Latvian SSR adopted the declaration 'On the restoration of independence of the Republic of Latvia'.<sup>7</sup> The document was prepared by the PFL. One hundred thirty-eight deputies, most of them ethnic Latvians, voted for the document; one abstained; fifty-seven refused to take part in the voting. The declaration proclaimed the USSR's 'act of aggression' of 1940 a war crime and the Soviet rule illegal and anti-constitutional. It also announced the 'restoration' of Latvia's sovereignty and the enactment of four articles of the 1992 constitution: on independence, power vested in the people, national borders, and elections to the Saeima. The document marked the beginning of the transition to actual independence. In the process, the PFL encountered growing discontent among non-titular ethnic groups, Moscow's refusal to support the declaration adopted by the Supreme Council of the republic, the rise of new opposition in the parliament, including the 'Equal Rights' faction, and legal inconsistencies. Despite the declared sovereignty, the country had to observe pre-Soviet and Soviet laws and international legal rules. Technically, that made it possible for Latvian citizens to exercise their economic, cultural, social, and political rights. Until today, the question whether the Supreme Soviet of the Latvian SSR had the power to 'restore' laws, including the outdated constitution, which was immediately revised, remains a subject of legal debate. The 'restoration' of the republican constitution pursued primarily symbolic goals and reinforced the official doctrine of occupation.

The ideology of the transitional period was approved at the third PFL congress, which took place in October 1990. The convention elected a new chair — a doctor of Lithuanian descent, Romualds Ražuks. It discussed the preparation of new PFL first- and second-line leaders. The latter were to replace their seniors who had taken public office. PFL leaders were instructed to devise a development plan for the republic.

<sup>7</sup> *Latvijas PSR Augstākās padomes deklarācija par Latvijas Republikas neatkarības atgūšanu*. URL: <https://likumi.lv/doc.php?id=75539&mode=DOC> (accessed: 20.09.2019).

Dramatically new accents appeared in the resulting manifesto,<sup>8</sup> namely, radicalisation and commitment to ethnic nationalism. The new footing of the movement was the vision of both democratic and 'Latvian' Latvia. The nation was interpreted from a primordial perspective. Nationalism was institutionalised and turned into the ideological framework for solidarity and identity [27, p. 92]. The new PFL manifesto subjected international relations to the right of the Latvians to self-determination. The document declared the support of the Latvian state for the economic and cultural development of the indigenous peoples of Latvia — Latvians and Livonians [24, l. 210]. The mention of the small ethnic group was mostly symbolic. The notions 'national' and 'Latvian' were to be treated as equal. The PFL became the organisation that protected the Latvian people, its existence, and survival [24, l. 206]. The manifesto said that the PFL would struggle to reclaim the Latvian nation and to ensure its revival and the prosperity of all citizens of Latvia.

Remarkably, the third congress of the PFL demanded that Latvian citizenship be granted only to those who had been citizens of the republic as of June 17, 1940, and their direct descendants. Citizens' committees, which were declared the PFL's allies by its chair, and the Movement for National Independence, with which the organisation had never agreed before in public, pursued the same goal.

The antipathy of Moscow, the CPSU, and the CPL to the new opposition and the political decisions made under the aegis of the PFL led to diarchy and growing conflict. In effect, Latvia became independent only in 1991. On August 21, the republican Supreme Council adopted the constitutional law 'On the national status of the Republic of Latvia',<sup>9</sup> which marked the end of the transitional period. The Soviet was vested with the supreme power until the convocation of the Saeima. On August 24, the decree 'On the recognition of the independence of the Republic of Latvia' was signed by the president of the USSR. On September 5, independence was recognised by the State Council of the USSR.

Latvian independence made a bad situation worse for those who wanted Latvia to remain part of the USSR and for members of non-titular nations whose loyalty was questioned by the republican authorities. On October 15, 1991, the Supreme Soviet rejected the idea of automatic citizenship for all residents of the republic and adopted the resolution 'On the restoration of the right of citizens and the basic conditions for naturalisation'. The legal framework for citizenship was developed more than three years later. Immediately after independence, however, the authorities of 'democratic' Latvia made a major contribution to discrimination against approximately a third of the country's population (primarily, Russian speakers who had moved to the republic after 1940 and their descendants); that was very much in line with the plans of the PFL and the appeals of nationalists [18, p. 72]. As a result, only 64% of the population were eligible to participate

<sup>8</sup> *Latvijas Tautas fronte. III kongress. Programma. Statuti. Rezolucijas. LTF. Rīga, 1990.*

<sup>9</sup> *Latvijas Republikas konstitucionālais likums par Latvijas Republikas valstisko statusu.* URL: <https://likumi.lv/doc.php?id=69512> (accessed: 23.09.2019).

in elections and protect their interests in the political arena [28]. The problem of citizenship still prevents the country from reaching a satisfactory level of democratic development [29].

During Latvia's secession from the USSR, its Russian speakers were atomised and ideologically adrift. Some of them supported the Communist authorities; others, reforms, the Popular front, and independence. The latter placed their trust in the new leadership, which did not feel urged to declared its plans to discriminate against the 'immigrants', whom it viewed as the legacy of the 'Soviet occupation' [14]. At the peak of the transition, over a half of the Russian speakers either supported or was neutral to the PFL. As a result, Latvia's way to independence was relatively peaceful [15]. Anti-system and supra-ethnic opposition emerged as a response to the insufficient inclusivity of the political system, as a self-organisation effort of future 'aliens'. The Popular Front failed to ensure democratisation after destroying Soviet authoritarianism, as some researchers believe [4, p. 127].

Secession from the Soviet Union was countered by Interfront from October 1988. After the 1990 election, some of its members joined the 'Equal Rights' party. Founded by ethnic Russians and communists [16] as a response to the PFL's radical statements regarding national minorities, Interfront had about 300,000 members. Unable to block decisions made by the PFL in the Supreme Soviet of the republic, Latvia's Interfront took it to the streets to raise awareness of the official language controversy and the rights of the non-titular population. The movement went as far as to demand that a state of emergency be imposed and the republic be governed directly from Moscow. All those efforts were, however, futile. After the recognition of Latvian independence by the Union leadership, Interfront was banned alongside the CPL. Their members, who 'acted against the republic' after January 13, 1991, are still officially denied Latvian citizenship.

In the 1993 Saeima election, in which about 716,000 people could not take part, ethnic Latvians won 88 out of 100 seats. For comparison, in the Supreme Soviet, the titular nation was represented by 139 people out of the 201 deputies. Having secured slightly over 2.6% of the votes, the PFL did not pass the 4% electoral threshold. Six years later, after unsuccessful attempts to become a political party, the Popular Front dissolved. There are manifold reasons why the PFL failed in the 1993 election: the movement had neither new ideas nor concrete proposals except for the populist mantra that sovereignty was 'divine grace' and a cure-all; new parties were recruiting PFL members amid internal conflicts in the movement; its leaders were lacking skills of political administration; its popularity was declining, particularly, among non-titular ethnic groups; workplace organisations were disbanded after the CPL and trade unions had lost their controlling influence.

The winner of the Saeima election was the right-wing party 'Latvian Way', established in 1993. It got 32.4% of the votes. Among its founders was the member of the PFL, Gorbunov, who once again headed the parliament. The National

Independence Movement, which had been transformed into a party, came second with 13.3%. Alongside the newly-popular nationalist and right parties, the 'Equal Rights' party was also represented in the parliament. It took, however, only seven seats. The party was founded on the basis of the 'Equal Rights' faction, which had 57 seats in the Supreme Soviet and advanced the interests of Latvian Russian speakers, former communists, and supporters of the USSR.

Popular anti-systemic supra-ethnic opposition in Latvia disappeared for the following reasons: the illegal status of higher-level organisations; the absence of a clear course of action; the low morale of the followers after the disintegration of the USSR; a relatively low level of international tension explained, among other things, by partial support for independence by the Russian speakers; naturalisation opportunities and the absence of barriers in day-to-day life for most minorities. The ethnonational policy, which asserted the priority of the titular nation, confronted now stateless Russian speakers with the choice — to assimilate or to remain excluded from the political process. From the mid-1990s, the number of residents reduced by more than 500,000 people. As on July 1, 2019, they accounted for only 10.5% of the population.<sup>10</sup>

Few in number, Russian-leaning parties and organisations tried to make a difference by protecting the interests and rights of the community. Most of their efforts were countered by the authorities, and they lacked electoral support. The other political forces played by the rules that had been established with the help of the PFL. Therefore, the supra-ethnic oppositional parties that advocate the idea of a civil nation are not anti-systemic. Despite the fragmented and often inconsistent identity of the Russian speakers, proof of which is the insufficient political and territorial unification around common cultural preferences [17], most of them vote for left and social-democratic parties.<sup>11</sup>

Regardless of its actual post-Communist achievements in democratic building, Latvia remains the least democratic Baltic State because of its alien problem. After independence, the percentage of the discriminated population has fallen. The result has been attained, however, by assimilation and emigration rather than the integration of non-titular ethnic groups. Against this background, nationalism continues to give the elite a political foothold and grants access to power, its resources, and tools to keep it. Having provided an ideological framework for nation-building, nationalism is uniting the titular population. Neither the elite nor ordinary members of the ethnic majority are willing to make radical changes. Therefore, in the near future, the ethnic democracy model will not be replaced by a better alternative.

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<sup>10</sup> Pilsonības un migrācijas lietu pārvalde. Latvijas iedzīvotāju skaits pašvaldībās. URL: [https://www.pmlp.gov.lv/lv/assets/ISPV\\_Pasvaldibas\\_iedzivotaju\\_skaits01072019.pdf](https://www.pmlp.gov.lv/lv/assets/ISPV_Pasvaldibas_iedzivotaju_skaits01072019.pdf) (accessed: 20.09.2019).

<sup>11</sup> A vivid example is the opposition party Harmony, which has been coming first in parliamentary elections since 2011.



## Conclusion

When the USSR leadership announced perestroika at the turn of the 1990s, the Popular Front of Latvia, a socio-political movement was established to support reforms and to lead Latvia to independence. It did not take long for the Popular Front to evolve from a late-Soviet civil institution first into a separatist ethnopolitical movement and later into a major political force. Without significant opposition from communists and the Union authorities, it initiated the 'restoration' of Latvia's sovereignty, leading to ethnic segregation of the population.

As the ideology of the Popular Front of Latvia, which once counted on support from national minorities, started to change, the idea of standing up for the democratic rights and interests of all residents of the Republic was abandoned. The Popular Front ensured the ethnopolitical mobilisation of the Latvians and created grounds for the exclusion of the Russian speakers who had moved to Latvia after 1940 and their descendants from political life.

Having achieved its primary goal, the independence of the country, the Popular Front of Latvia could neither function politically nor exist in the system that it had created. The PFL-encouraged attitude to minorities, who faced political, social, economic, and cultural discrimination, and the priority given to the titular nation contributed to the institutionalisation of ethnical nationalism as well as the emergence of a regime that is not democratic since it eliminated national equality and abandoned the principles of universal suffrage.

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